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DE RUEHCHI #0136/01 2480905
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P R 040905Z SEP 08
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0835
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0907

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000136

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP, DRL AND IO
NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/22/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: ANALYTICAL EXILES FAVOR LIMITED U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH BURMESE REGIME

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 75 (EXILES SEE OPPORTUNITY)

[B. CHIANG MAI 21 \(CHANGE IN BURMA\)](#)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary and Comment

[¶1.](#) (C) In a subtle shift, influential Burmese political pundits based in northern Thailand have begun advocating limited U.S. engagement with the Burmese regime over the past few months, likely spurred on by the acceleration of Burma's sham roadmap and the regime's bungled response to Cyclone Nargis. In their view, limited engagement can coexist with U.S. sanctions already in place, particularly targeted ones. The keys to this strategy, they believe, are identifying those military officers and Burmese Government bureaucrats who have a positive view of the U.S., and who see their affiliation with the regime purely as a means of survival; and ensuring that these officials fully comprehend the economic and political disparity between the regime's policies and those of other countries.

[¶2.](#) (C) This approach is predicated on the view that a transition to democratic governance in Burma is a long-term goal, and probably unachievable in the short-term. It also reflects the reality that Thai-based Burmese exile groups that are overtly political, many of which have existed for upwards of 20 years, have failed to effect change inside Burma. When the Ambassador discussed prospects for change in Burma with Burmese exiles in January (Ref B), a group that included two of the sources for this message, the exiles still harbored some hope for near-term change, though they agreed that if change did not come to Burma soon, the Burmese would have to wait several years. Now, they are discounting prospects for short-term change, focusing instead on longer-term strategic planning. End Summary and Comment.

Talk to Whom? How?

[¶3.](#) (C) In recent separate meetings, Irrawaddy Editor Aung Zaw, Aung Naing Oo of the Vahu Development Institute (VDI), and independent analyst/businessman Bo Kyaw Nyein all encouraged the U.S. to pursue "limited engagement" with Burmese officials. They emphasized that any such engagement could not include top-level military officers or senior GoB officials at this stage. Rather, they highlighted the importance of identifying and cultivating those mid and low-level officers and government bureaucrats they say are sympathetic to the U.S.

¶ 14. (C) After identifying the target personnel, our three contacts suggested a variety of approaches we could employ. Aung Naing Oo recommends feeding them a steady diet of texts on the principles of democracy and economic conditions in other countries, thereby allowing them to draw their own conclusions about the regime's repressive political and backward economic policies. He emphasized the need to provide this material in Burmese, since many members of the target group cannot read English at a sufficiently high level. (Note: We provided Aung Naing Oo with the Burmese translation of the most recent human rights report.) Aung Zaw expressed interest in starting a dialogue with them, even at very low diplomatic levels. Bo Kyaw Nyein was even bolder, suggesting that the U.S. consider funding travel to international training for them, and giving Burmese military personnel the opportunity to interact with U.S. troops.

(Note: Bo Nyein is aware that current USG policy restricts military training for Burmese armed forces. End note.)

¶ 15. (C) Aung Zaw pointed to three former GoB officials he asserted are "pragmatic," and with whom he believes we can engage at an appropriate level. They are former Burmese Ambassador to the UK Kyaw Win, former Deputy Head of Military Intelligence under Khin Nyunt (also named Kyaw Win), and Kyaw Thein, another former Military Intelligence figure. Aung Zaw asserted that all three have valuable insights about who is who in the regime that they would be willing to share, and that could help us identify sympathetic officials that might be ripe for us to engage with.

¶ 16. (C) Outside the regime, Aung Zaw suggested we consider approaching Thi Ha, brother of regime crony Tay Za, as well as Michael Mo Myint and General Thura Shwe Mann's two sons. These four too, Aung Zaw opined, either out of self-interest or a real desire to see change, might also be of assistance. Separately, Aung Naing Oo agreed to provide his own list of names of individuals sympathetic to U.S. views.

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Why?

¶ 17. (C) Our contacts offered several arguments in support of this approach, the most common of which was that Thai-based exile groups have been unable to effect change inside Burma, despite having worked at it for over 20 years. Aung Naing Oo and other VDI officials also see the upcoming 2010 elections as a chance to shape Burma's future government, despite all the imperfections of the regime's roadmap. VDI believes that it will be possible to gradually change Burma from within after the elections, and that boycotting the process only ensures a perpetuation of military rule.

¶ 18. (C) For his part, Aung Zaw said the Burmese people have suffered too long under military rule, and that a different way forward needs to be found. The regime's bungled relief effort in the wake of Cyclone Nargis drove this point home for him, he told us. If the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis haven't created the conditions for change, he asked rhetorically, what kind of suffering is necessary to bring them about?

¶ 19. (C) Aung Zaw foreshadowed much violence in the lead-up to the 2010 election, arguing the situation would get worse before improving, and also highlighted the election as an opportunity to find a way forward for Burma. Bo Nyein noted the lack of leverage the U.S. had over the Burmese regime and military, opining that we had to find a way to exert positive influence over them in addition to sanctions, which are strictly punitive.

Bo Nyein also appeared to share Aung Zaw's concern for violence in the run-up to the election, reiterating the conventional wisdom that the military will form political parties to contest the vote and that the military would use the regime's mass mobilization organization (Union Solidarity and Development Association) to intimidate its opponents.

What About Sanctions?

¶10. (C) None of our interlocutors advocated lifting sanctions as part of this strategy. Aung Naing Oo, the most forceful proponent of limited U.S. engagement, told us he understands the purpose of the sanctions and the moral support they provide to the democratic opposition. However, all three made a plea for more targeted and less "general" sanctions. According to Bo Kyaw Nyein, sanctions such as the 2003 import ban only hurt the general public, whereas measures such as specific asset freezes, visa restrictions, and targeting the regime's crony companies have real practical effects. Also of significance is that all our interlocutors, while advocating limited U.S. engagement with the Burmese regime, nonetheless underscored that their ideal preference is for a direct, open internal Burmese dialogue that is time-bound and genuine, with representatives of all stakeholders allowed to participate.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and Rangoon.

MORROW
ANDERSON